

Folk Arts

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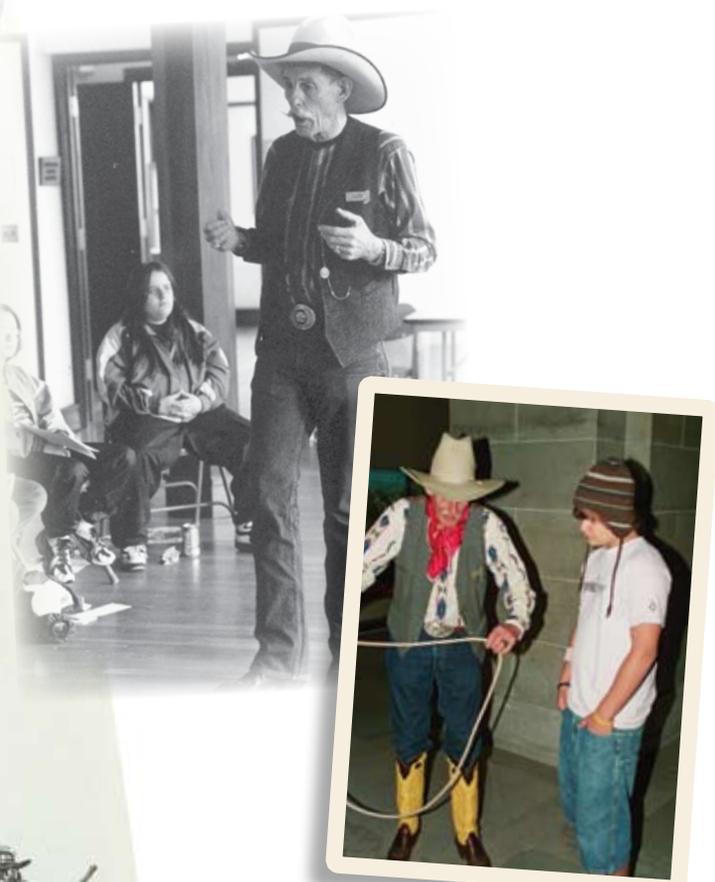
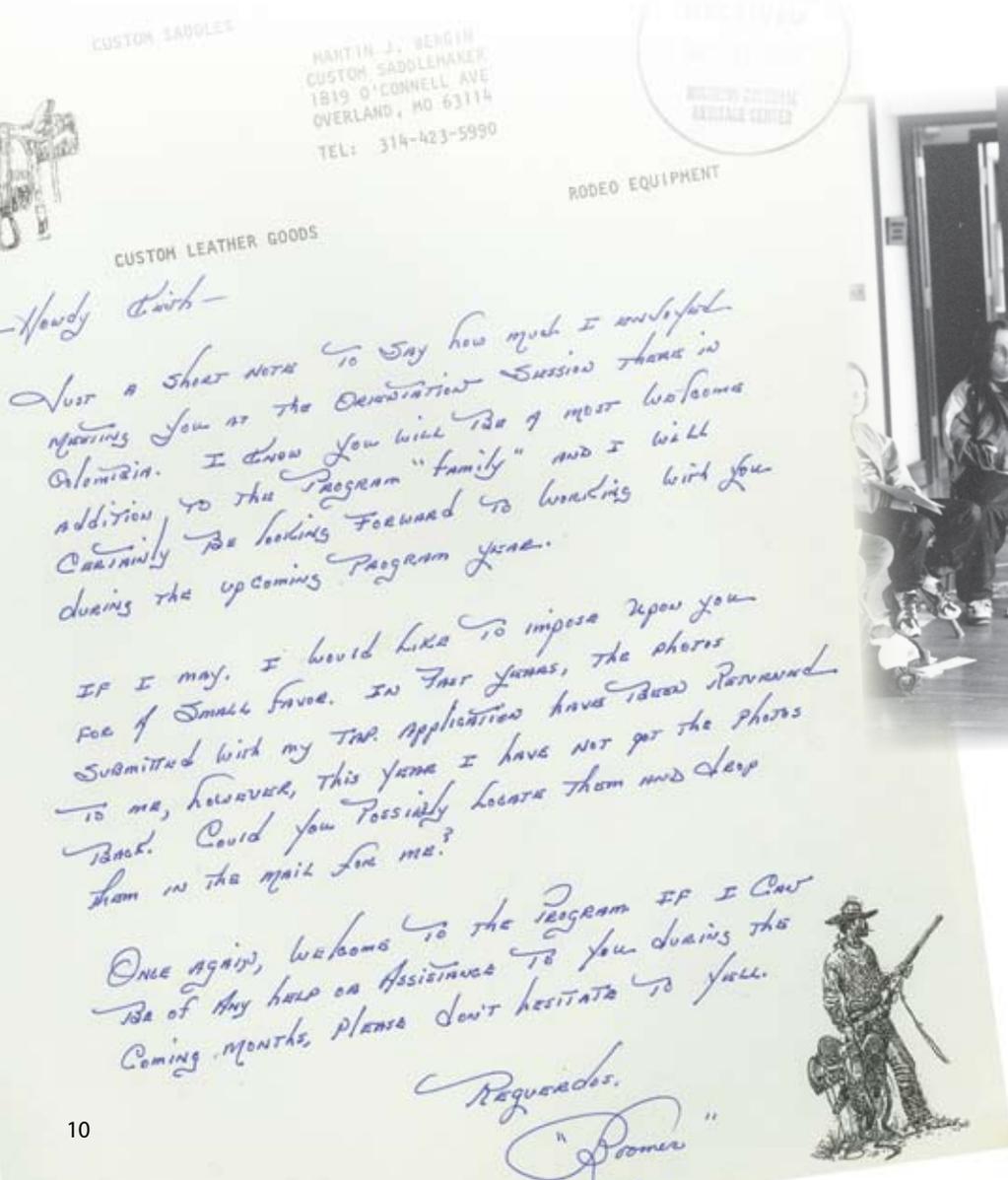
When Tradition Meets Technology

The connection between tradition and technology is something I have pondered during the first four months of my graduate internship with the Missouri Folk Arts Program. I have assisted with the myriad tasks of presenting artists at a festival and with convening a panel to review applications for the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (TAAP). My current assignment is to gather and assemble information from the archives of the Western Historical Manuscript Collection (WHMC) in Ellis Library for an

upcoming online exhibit about master traditional artists. The digital exhibit is another project in the yearlong celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of TAAP, a program funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Missouri Arts Council, where over 350 master artists have now passed their skills onto apprentices across the state of Missouri.

At WHMC, I sit with a wall of card catalogues to my back and rooms of digitizing equipment to my left. With my handy laptop ready for note-taking, I

happily dig into the boxes of paper files from the history of the TAAP. The job of assembling an online representation of these master artists makes me consider how this translation is going to work. When people think about "traditional arts," people don't tend to think "technology." Some would even say there is a tension between the two. However, the number of people who turn to the internet to learn more about the arts is rapidly expanding. Folks who are interested in listening to some old time fiddle music,



In 2005 Martin Bergin demonstrated his roping techniques at the Capitol in Jefferson City, Mo.

for instance, can easily type the term into a popular search engine and find over a million websites, the first of which provides digital audio and video for immediate enjoyment. And if folks are going to search for old time fiddlers on the internet, they must learn about Missouri's fine fiddling traditions.

The kind staff members at the WHMC listen to me as I uncover an interesting snippet and say, *not-so-sotto voce*, "Look at this!" As I am researching, one thing I notice is that a kind of writing is vanishing from the public hand. In one of the many archival boxes, I have stumbled upon a piece of correspondence from Martin Bergin, a master saddle-maker and cowboy poet who lives and works in Overland, a St. Louis suburb. Bergin's handwriting in this letter from 1987 is simultaneously meticulous and dynamic; each word is placed just so on the page, while the capital P's swoop into place, the J's come to a point and then spring off jauntily.

The difficulties of translating work from one form to another are not new. In application materials from the 1980's, master blacksmith Darold Rinedollar modestly states that he has difficulty expressing himself, while his apprentice Paul Dean Harvey submits, "I stand there black as the coal I use, with people looking in wondering, how can he do this? Where is the machine? I can honestly answer, right here in my own two arms," evocatively translating the three dimensional art of blacksmithing onto the flat page. With their example, I see that my task is to distill just as evocatively all the complexities of artists and their art, translating pages in the archives to profiles on the web.

The appropriateness of the online exhibition is even clearer when I consider the master artists' own relationships to technology. As I wend my way through more correspondence, the ways that new tools are used and the needs those tools satisfy illustrate the dynamism of the artists. For example, old time fiddler Johnny Ray Bruce, who lived in Bosworth, a tiny town in west central Missouri, credits learning his instrument traditionally from relatives and friends, but he also credits "radio and tapes," sounds available for him to listen and play over and over



Left: James Price planes wood in his workshop.



Below: Johnny Ray Bruce (left) demonstrates a tune for his apprentice in 1985 and Edna Mae Davis calls square dance in 1988.



again, and to imitate. Similarly, Edna Mae Davis, the square dancer and caller from Ava, Mo., who is often credited with sustaining traditional dances in the Ozark region, also relied on technology. Though she insisted on calling square dancing figures to the tunes of a live band, she used records often to rehearse, largely, I imagine, for sheer convenience.

Even the purists—those who strive to maintain a self-described "authenticity" of materials or techniques—are influenced by current demands in the products they create. Master wood joiner (and anthropologist) James Price of Naylor, Mo., prides himself on using implements from the 1800s, making them, as he says, "sing again" to work with wood, creating intricately fitted pieces without the use of nails or glue. He writes in a letter from 1985, "A great feeling of independence is achieved by knowing that without electricity, modern abrasives, and tungsten carbide cutters, wood can be sawed, smoothed, shaped, and joined..." Still, Price shows flexibility in the products he creates. For one particular project, the master and his apprentice Christopher Miller constructed a wooden tower for Miller's compact disc collection. Price boasts that the "piece will outlive us all," so long as fire or flood don't intervene. And, now, over twenty years later, we realize the piece will probably outlive compact discs as a popular method to convey recorded music.

Technology and tradition are not exclusive of each other; they are both

tools, and we can choose the ones that best serve our needs for the job. Indeed, the technologies of communication continue to expand and offer us more tools for transmitting tradition. Next year, the applications for the TAAP program will be offered online. Some applicants will print out the application and fill it in by hand; others will use a word processing program; and of course, still others will call by phone to request paper copies be sent through the mail. Offering all these options to the public allows for the greatest flexibility and gives the artists the opportunity to use whatever tools they're comfortable with. This shift means, of course, that the carefully-crafted handwriting may appear in the archives less and less. Lucky for me, I'm a sucker for fancy fonts, too.

Information and images: Missouri Folk Arts Program, Records (WUNP6045), Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Columbia, MO

Special thanks to the WHMC staff.

